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Rewriting the Sentence in First-Year Composition: Pedagogies and Perspectives

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Rewriting the Sentence in First-Year Composition:

Pedagogies and Perspectives

by June Newton

A capstone project submitted in partial fulfillment of the
Requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Professional Writing in the Department of English

In the College of Humanities and Social Sciences of
Kennesaw State University

Kennesaw, Georgia

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College of Humanities & Social Sciences
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Certificate of Approval

This is to certify that the Capstone Project of

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enthusiastic about proofreading every single essay I've written in graduate school as he claimed to be.

Finally, I am indebted to the wonderful students at Kennesaw State University, who taught me much more about composition studies and teaching than I could ever learn in a textbook.

Introduction

We are at that time of year when millions of American college and high school students will stride across the stage, take diploma in hand and set out to the wider world, most of them utterly unable to write a clear and coherent English sentence. - Stanley Fish

In a May 2005 *New York Times* column, Stanley Fish denounced the writing skills of young graduates across the country, placing the blame directly on their teachers: "Students can't write clean English sentences because they are not being taught what sentences are" ("Devoid"). While alarming, this sentiment is hardly new. In fact, Fish's quote echoes the words of a "distinguished visiting committee" at Harvard University in the 1890s, which reported that "about 25 percent of the students now admitted to Harvard are unable to write their mother-tongue with the ease and freedom absolutely necessary to enable them to proceed advantageously in any college course" (qtd. in Bok 82). A key point in both of these statements is that many students—from past to present—enter college unprepared for the writing demands of the academy. As Derek Bok observes in *Our Underachieving Colleges*, "Freshmen have never arrived at college with impressive writing skills," a fact that led Harvard to establish the first "Freshman English" course in the mid-1880s (82).

Following Harvard's lead, the requisite freshman English class proliferated in colleges across America. However, criticisms about both entering and exiting college students' writing skills have persisted throughout the twentieth century and well into the new millennium, beleaguering students and their teachers alike. Harvey Daniels details

this history of grievances in *Famous Last Words*. In 1926, American journalist and

cultural critic H. L. Mencken complained that the writing of average American high

school students is too often "confused and puerile nonsense," and, like Stanley Fish, he

attributed the problem to "weak" English teachers, whom he described as "feeble in

intelligence" (56). A business executive in 1961 lamented, "Recent graduates, including

those with university degrees, seem to have no mastery of the language at all. They

cannot construct a simple declarative sentence, either orally or in writing . . . Grammar is

a complete mystery to almost all recent graduates" (qtd. in Daniels 32). A controversial

Newsweek article, "Why Johnny Can't Write," proclaimed yet another American writing

crisis in 1975:

> If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they
>
> graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with
>
> any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and
>
> planning to attend college, the chances are less than ever that they will be
>
> able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there.
>
> (Sheils 58)

One year later, a Midwestern college faculty member asserted, "The majority of

college freshmen can't write a complete sentence in their native language and can't

organize their thoughts effectively primarily because they haven't become aware of

language" (qtd. in Daniels 14). More recently, plenty of surveys, government reports, and

scholarly research indicate that private and public sector employers, and many others

who value effective communication both within and beyond the Ivory Tower, agree with

Fish: too many high school and college graduates have trouble writing sentences, leaving them unprepared for the writing demands of the twenty-first century.

When I began my graduate teaching assistantship as a writing assistant in Kennesaw State University's Writing Center, I saw for myself how college writers struggle with syntax: fusions and fragments, comma splices, and awkwardly structured sentences often obstruct the developing writer's intended meaning. These problems became even more evident when I began teaching my own argument-based First-Year Composition (FYC) courses. For too many students, syntactic problems—entrenched and resistant to redress—compromise the good ideas at the foundation of their arguments.

The obvious need for sentence-level proficiency is acknowledged by the Council of Writing Program Administrators (WPA) in the organization's 2014 "WPA Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0)." The text lists "Knowledge of Conventions" as the fourth of four broad categories, which also include rhetorical knowledge; critical thinking, reading, and composing; and composing processes. Among the thirty-six bullet points comprising all four categories, only one specifically addresses a skills-based need to "develop knowledge of linguistic structures, including grammar, punctuation, and spelling through practice in composing and revising, all of which support attending to sentence-level problems in FYC."

But sentence-level concerns seem overshadowed by other priorities evident in this "amended overhaul" of the original statement, which was issued in 1999. Recognizing the unique demands of writing in digital spaces, the initial title of the "Critical Thinking, Reading, and Writing" category has been revised to replace the word "writing" with "composing"—reflecting the WPA's explicit position that embraces and accommodates

"the ubiquity of digital composing" in FYC (Dryer et al.130)—an activity that may or may not require "writing" with words and sentences at all. Furthermore, the conventions of digital composing necessitate attention to graphics and document design, which can limit classroom time spent on matters of syntax. And the WPA's statement makes no mention of prevalent critical studies pedagogies, at the core of many FYC syllabi, that leave little room for sentence-level concerns—particularly those related to standard English—in classrooms focused on actively resisting and combating the power structures perpetuated by dominant discourses.

Herein lies a perplexing, perpetual enigma: How can instructors help students improve their sentence-level writing skills while pursuing a broad range of what, at times, seem to be competing FYC goals—especially when so many developing writers enter our classrooms with deep-rooted deficiencies?

This capstone seeks to answer the question. Chapter 1 addresses the need for instructors to help students write better sentences, arguing that poor writing skills can lead to compromised credibility in academic, professional, and certain social writing spaces. This reality is supported by research both inside and outside of composition studies. Despite such evidence, syntactic concerns in FYC have largely been sidelined amid fragmented disciplinary priorities and debates about the effectiveness of grammar instruction. As a result, many students exit FYC classrooms not knowing how to identify and correct problematic sentences; some are even unaware that their syntax is problematic, leading to adverse consequences in a number of writing contexts.

However, as chapter 2 explains, effective sentence pedagogies have been employed for at least two thousand years, beginning with the imitation exercises at the

center of rhetoric classrooms in ancient Greece. From the classical period onward, the practice of imitating model texts was considered essential to the developing rhetor, eventually making its way to colonial American colleges. But as a young democracy grew, welcoming diverse new populations of students to higher education in the late 1800s, the goals of college writing instruction shifted from rhetorical effectiveness to "correctness," yielding to the current-traditional, product-oriented paradigm that was ultimately rejected by contemporary compositionists.

Several factors converged in the middle of the twentieth century that led to yet another change of course for college writing classrooms in the United States: the nascent discipline of composition studies embraced the writing process, research studies discredited traditional grammar instruction, classical rhetoric experienced a renaissance, and a flurry of interest in three promising sentence-based pedagogies gained traction. These three "sentence rhetorics,"[1] as composition scholar Robert Connors refers to them in "The Erasure of the Sentence," include Francis Christensen's generative rhetoric (known to many as sentence expansion), the imitation exercises revived from the classical tradition, and sentence-combining exercises. Connors describes a pedagogical stretch during which the sentence rhetorics received serious attention among compositionists, a period that began in the early 1960s and culminated in an "extraordinary moment in the sun" during the 1970s ("Erasure" 97). Despite their apparent success, this trio of sentence pedagogies petered out in the early 1980s as prominent scholarly voices in the field—in pursuit of theoretical frameworks and

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[1] Throughout this capstone, "sentence rhetorics" refers to the term introduced by Robert Connors in "The Erasure of the Sentence" to denote generative rhetoric, imitation, and sentence-combining exercises.

disciplinary recognition—dismissed the sentence rhetorics as unproven, mechanistic practices evocative of the scorned current-traditional rhetoric model of instruction. To use Connors's fitting metaphor, they were "erased" from composition studies.

But as chapter 3 reveals, the sentence rhetorics extolled by Connors had not been erased after all—just sidelined for a time. In fact, these pedagogies persevered, as a handful of composition scholars in the 1990s initiated renewed conversations about grammar's role in creating meaning with language. In fact, compositionists increasingly began to view sentence-level choices as a complementary tool during the writing process and a crucial component of the rhetorical canon of style. Many of these grammar-minded scholars have published literature for instructors like me who seek engaging resources to help students learn how to identify and correct syntactic errors and write rhetorically effective sentences for given audiences and purposes.

An annotated bibliography at the end of chapter 3 shares some of the resources I have found most interesting and useful in my graduate courses and during my research for this capstone. Notably, all of them view grammatical choices as essential to good style, and almost all incorporate one or more of the sentence rhetorics. FYC colleagues might consider using these sentence rhetorics to complement their own pedagogical goals, especially those of helping students communicate more effectively at the sentence level.

Lamentably, first-year writers in American classrooms have, as a whole, never been prepared for college writing, and first-year writing instructors have been incessantly criticized for not mending the problem. While compositionists have determined that current-traditional methods focused on "correctness" are not the answer, Robert Connors

has reminded us of an exciting mid-twentieth-century era of efficacious sentence-level instruction, widely practiced in composition studies, when both correct and persuasive writing was within reach for students who imitated, expanded, and combined sentences. A muted disciplinary conversation seeks to revive interest in such sentence rhetorics, particularly as a means of strengthening sentence-level grammatical choices and style. FYC instructors should listen and contribute to this conversation—because if we don't help our students learn how to write better sentences, who will?

Chapter 1: Ethos and the Sentence

In First-Year Composition, sentences are often considered in terms of their rhetorical problems, not potential. Instructors know too well that errors of spelling and mechanics—often the result of carelessness or failure to consult a handbook—are annoying, especially when students have access to so many resources that *should* help them minimize surface errors. Handbooks contain the rules, *Purdue OWL* is just a click away, and spell check flags at least some misspelled words. But when it comes to messy syntax, grading essays can be downright grueling: garbled sentences are difficult to read, too often interfering with intended messages. As Mina Shaughnessy explains, syntax errors are the "'big' problems in sentences—problems that keep a sentence from 'working' or being understood as opposed to those that keep it from being appropriate to a specific situation." And they are "disrupting" for the reader who might—or might *not*—be able to understand what the writer is trying to say (47). Unfortunately, in FYC and many other writing contexts, disruptive sentences can diminish a writer's ethos.

Error and Ethos

Aristotle addresses this matter in *Rhetoric*, defining ethos as "the personal character of the speaker." He explains that "[p]ersuasion is achieved by the speaker's personal character when the speech is so spoken as to make us think him credible . . . [H]is character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses" ("From *Rhetoric*" 182; bk. 1, ch. 2). In fact, the way in which a message is

conveyed with language—known as the rhetorical canon of style—is often the primary means of establishing ethos, especially when the audience has no other way of judging a writer's credibility. Ultimately, if an audience does not believe the speaker to be credible, the two other rhetorical appeals discussed in *Rhetoric*—the appeals to pathos (emotions) and logos (logic and reason)—are unlikely to be successful.

The first principle of style, according to Aristotle, is "correctness." As translator George Kennedy explains, the advice to "speak [good] Greek" in book 3 of *Rhetoric* is essentially a call for grammatical correctness—even though, in Aristotle's fourth-century B.C.E. Greece, a fully developed system of grammar had yet to emerge (231). Certainly, contemporary scholars agree with Aristotle: there is a strong connection between errors and compromised ethos. In other words, mistakes matter.

In *Errors and Expectations*, a seminal publication that initiated the field of basic writing in the 1970s, Mina Shaughnessy describes errors as "unintentional and unprofitable intrusions upon the consciousness of the reader, demanding energy without giving any return in meaning." Shaughnessy points out that even small errors are costly to the writer in certain writing contexts, and "given the hard bargain [a writer] must strike with his reader, he usually cannot afford many of them" (12-13). Defining errors as "flawed verbal transactions" between the writer and reader, Joseph Williams explains that the *reader* determines *what* an error is, *whether an error exists* in any given text, and *how serious* any given error might be. Another significant observation Williams makes is that responses to errors can vary tremendously among readers, some of whom are downright contemptuous of "perceived linguistic violations" that others might not even notice (153).

Ultimately, then, the ethos-related price of any error to a writer depends on the audience. In the FYC classroom, consequences are determined by instructors who might lower grades or request essay revisions. But for certain audiences outside of the academy, "flawed verbal transactions" can be much more costly—especially in the workplace. The National Commission on Writing's (NCW) 2004 survey of sixty-four major U.S. corporations indicated that a majority of them appraise applicants' writing abilities when hiring for salaried, professional positions. In professional settings, writing is considered a "threshold skill" for both employment and promotion (*Writing: A Ticket* 3)—so important that private employers spend an estimated, and shocking, 3.1 billion dollars per year to provide remedial writing training for employees (18). One respondent complained, "The skills of new college graduates are deplorable—across the board: spelling, grammar, sentence structure . . . I can't believe people come out of college not knowing what a sentence is" (14).

A survey conducted in 2005 by the National Governors Association revealed similar concerns: "[D]espite the high value that state employees put on writing skills, a significant numbers [sic] of their employees do not meet states' expectations. These deficiencies cost taxpayers nearly a quarter of a billion dollars annually" (NCW, *Writing: A Powerful Message* 3). Forty-nine of the respondents indicated that writing is a required skill for two-thirds of their professional employees, and, as explained by one state employer, the consequences of poor writing can be costly for taxpayers, who foot the bill for errors: "If there are tax policy directives or guidelines that the filers don't quite get—and the tax staff reviewers don't get right either—that creates a financial mess" (4).

A 2014 survey of four hundred employers by Hart Research Associates, commissioned by the Association of American Colleges and Universities, concluded that eighty-two percent of employers believe that "the ability to effectively communicate in writing" is a "very important" learning outcome for college graduates (4), yet only twenty-seven percent of employers feel that today's graduates are well prepared in the area of written communication. At the same time, sixty-five percent of students surveyed believe they *are* primed for workplace writing (12). This "notable gap" between graduates' and potential employers' perceptions of writing readiness means that job applicants, unaware of their own writing deficiencies, might never know they have written syntactically challenged cover letters, perhaps ruining their chances for interviews. And it puts obliviously weak writers at a disadvantage when it comes to opportunities for career advancement, especially when writing skills are a factor in determining raises and promotions.

Another stinging reality is that the ability to communicate using standard written English determines credibility in many social contexts—even on Internet dating websites, in this social media age of 140-character tweets and scantily punctuated texts. In a 2015 *Match.com* survey of more than five thousand singles, eighty-eight percent of women and seventy-five percent of men ranked grammar as an important criterion for evaluating a prospective date (Wells). Fused sentences, misplaced semicolons, and lack of parallel structures are among syntactic problems flagged by "grammar snobs," who "harbor one of the last permissible prejudices," according to linguistics professor John Mcwhorter. He adds, "The energy that used to go into open classism and racism now goes into disparaging people's grammar" (qtd. in Wells). The many college students active on

dating websites might be interested to know that a growing number of people use grammar apps like *Grammarly* to evaluate writing skills in digital spaces, which to some are a measure of a person's effort, intelligence, and work ethic (Wells).

Lisa Delpit, an educator and scholar who has lived and taught in communities where nonstandard dialects are prevalent, is fully aware of the prejudices and limitations cast upon those who struggle with standard written and spoken English. However, she notes that a number of well-intentioned educators are concerned that teaching the basics of dominant discourses to students from nondominant cultures will rob them of their identities and further oppress them (1313). At the same time, Delpit explains that many students and parents know too well that mastering dominant discourses might be the only way to overcome their disadvantaged socio-economic status. While she concedes that acquiring a new discourse is not an easy task, and that it does require much skills-based practice, Delpit argues that it can be done when students and teachers are committed to success—without compromising home languages and cultural traditions. Furthermore, in the spirit of Henry Louis Gates, dominant discourses can be used by the historically oppressed to effectively "challenge the tenets of European belief systems" (1317).

Another proponent of teaching the dominant discourse for liberatory means is Donald Lazere, a professor of English, prolific author, and self-described "leftist" who offers a compelling argument for skills-based learning in "Back to Basics: A Force for Oppression or Liberation?":

> In a society whose information environment is immensely sophisticated, ability to gain access to, understand, and critically evaluate the dominant modes of discourse (of which academic English is a key component) is an

essential survival skill—not only for conforming to the dominant culture,

but for resisting or opposing its manipulations of information and rhetoric.

(14)

Lazere is responding to pedagogues who challenge society's assumptions that composition classes should function as "gatekeepers"—weeding out the intellectually unfit and servicing the demands of the corporate elite.

Compositionist Jeff Smith adds that a majority of students enter the academy specifically to pursue "college-related career goals"—which include learning the "rules" of standard English—recognizing that the many gatekeepers outside of higher education expect them to know these rules (Smith 303-04). Delpit, Lazere, and Smith believe that teachers have an ethical responsibility to help students master the forms and mechanics of standard English, thus empowering them to choose for themselves how to use the dominant discourse—whether for entering and succeeding in the workforce, or for opposing injustices in the world around them.

Arbitrary it may be, but standard English remains the dominant American discourse in 2016. Indeed, the grammarians in our midst notice and judge errors—overlooking job applicants, denying promotions to subordinates, gossiping to their grammarian friends and colleagues about the fused sentences and dangling modifiers they spy in emails, and rejecting romantic overtures from those who don't pass muster on dating websites. Writers who demonstrate too many lapses in the discourse of power will continue to be evaluated harshly in academic, professional, and certain social contexts.

Where Has All the Grammar Gone?

Grammar deficiencies are at the root of stigmatizing syntactic problems, but grammar does not get much, if any, instructional attention in FYC. As early as 1936, the notion of formal grammar instruction began losing its luster at all educational levels when the National Council of Teachers of English (NCTE) determined that "all teaching of grammar separate from the manipulation of sentences be discontinued . . . since every scientific attempt to prove that knowledge of grammar is useful has failed" (qtd. in Weaver, *Teaching* 9). An even more damaging critique of traditional grammar instruction was published in *Research in Written Composition*, a 1963 NCTE report written by Richard Braddock et al., which concluded, "The teaching of formal grammar has a negligible or, because it usually displaces some instruction and practice in actual composition, even a harmful effect on the improvement of writing" (37-38). By formal grammar instruction, the authors refer to the longtime practice of teaching grammar via lessons on the eight parts of speech, prescriptive rules that govern language usage, and the applications of these concepts in discrete classroom drills and exercises, all disconnected from the actual process of writing.

The description of this widely used method of teaching grammar as "harmful" was particularly alarming to educators. And if any further condemnation was needed of traditional grammar instruction, more followed at the Carnegie-funded Dartmouth Conference of 1966, just three years after the Braddock et al. report was released. Approximately fifty eminent American and British scholars of English—charged with answering the question "What is English?"—did not agree on an answer to the question

(Harris 634), but they did affirm that teaching grammar is "a waste of time" (Muller qt. in Myhill and Watson 42).

Within this transformational context of the 1960s, the field of composition studies crystallized, rooted in the 1949 founding of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (CCCC). Discarding product-oriented, current-traditional practices—especially skills-based grammar instruction—the burgeoning field embraced the process movement, which dominated research and scholarship efforts through the mid-1980s and redirected the focus of teaching from assessing finished written products to guiding students through multiple stages of the writing process (Durst 1658).

As composition studies continued to evolve, so did higher education, with an increasingly diverse student population. An influx of basic writers during the open admissions era of the 1970s sparked a flurry of scholarship on error—how it is defined, perceived, and treated in the classroom, including the role grammar should, or shouldn't, play in the teaching of writing. During the same decade, the CCCC joined a chorus of voices challenging the "myth of a standard American dialect" with the publication of "Students' Right to Their Own Language." This controversial position statement, reaffirmed in 2014, recognizes the validity of nonstandard dialects both inside and outside of the classroom, and it chides composition pedagogues who teach and expect students to write according to the conventions of standard English for preserving a discriminatory status quo: "English teachers who feel they are bound to accommodate the linguistic prejudices of employers perpetuate a system that is unfair to both students who have job skills and to the employers who need them."

Concurrent with these 1970s developments in composition studies, Brazilian educator Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* informed a growing movement of critical writing pedagogies, which view language and knowledge as socially constructed tools that have too often been used by those in power to dominate the powerless. For critical writing instructors, the writing classroom became a scene not for perpetuating hegemonic ideologies and arbitrarily dominant discourses, but for using language to question and resist the oppressive nature of these discourses, as well as to effect necessary social change.

Even the venerated *Errors and Expectations* has been rebuked by critical theorists. Min-zhan Lu's controversial 1991 essay—"Redefining the Legacy of Mina Shaughnessy: A Critique of the Politics of Linguistic Innocence"—directly challenges the assumption that mastering what Shaughnessy calls the "language of public transactions" (125) merely expands the basic writer's discursive options and opens professional doors. While conceding that the author has made important contributions to composition studies, Lu contends that she does not fully recognize the complex interplay of language and identity, particular among writers who might feel that acquiring a dominant discourse means abandoning home discourses. Shaughnessy's basic writing pedagogy, according to Lu, "enacts a systematic denial of the political context of students' linguistic decisions" (37).

In the introduction to *The Norton Book of Composition Studies*, Susan Miller acknowledges such theoretical divergences as composition studies "continues to adjust its practices to various specialized goals and cultural distractions, all of which challenge many [of the] public expectations about language instruction even as they create

important new academic customs" (xxxvi). These "cultural distractions" and "new academic customs" are evident in fifteen chapters representing an array of FYC pedagogical options in the 2014 edition of *A Guide to Composition Pedagogies*: basic writing, collaborative writing, community-engaged, critical, cultural studies, expressive, feminist, genre, literature and composition, new media, online and hybrid, process, researched writing, rhetoric and argumentation, and second language writing (Tate et al.).

And in an intensifying digital environment, the most recent version of the Council of Writing Program Administrators "Outcomes Statement for First-Year Composition (3.0)" broadens the concept of "composing" to include multi-media applications, which necessitate instructional time—already stretched thin—to teach students how to apply images and graphics in print and digital contexts. With such a broad selection of theoretical frameworks from which to choose, FYC pedagogical goals may vary greatly from one program to another. Furthermore, beyond institutional and departmental goals, the "personal philosophies" of individual teachers greatly shape classroom lessons and content, so that FYC offerings, even in the same composition studies program, may bear little resemblance to one another (Taggart et al. 6).

Within what Miller describes as a "field whose center has become difficult to find" (xlv), the practical imperatives that led Harvard to establish the inaugural freshman writing course in the late 1800s—to remediate the error-filled writing of entering college students—have been sidelined. As Martha Kolln observes, "the study of the language itself"—highly valued within language arts curricula until the early 1960s—had all but disappeared from the NCTE's annual meeting by 1993, when the word "grammar" made a sole (and unfavorable) appearance in a session titled, "Beyond Grammar in the

Classroom" ("Rhetorical Grammar" 27). Kolln, a long-time composition pedagogue, adds that the profession has suffered under "anti-grammar policies" that have tainted grammar instruction of all kinds, not just the prescriptive variety (29-30).

Amid perennial debates about grammar instruction and disciplinary priorities lies a composition conundrum: Many, if not most, FYC instructors do not teach grammar, yet they expect FYC students to write grammatically correct sentences. In guiding students through the writing process, surface errors are overlooked in early drafts because global revisions of content and organization are most important at this stage; before final drafts are due, students are reminded to proofread and polish their essays, which might seem like trivial afterthoughts to distracted college writers. However, instructors often offer an Aristotelian caution that too many errors can compromise a writer's credibility, as pointed out in the following passage from a chapter on ethos in the popular FYC textbook *Everything's an Argument*:

> [W]henever you write a paper or present an idea, you are sending signals about your credibility, whether you intend to or not. If your ideas are reasonable, your sources are reliable, and your language is appropriate to the project, you suggest to academic readers that you're someone whose ideas might deserve attention. Details matter: helpful graphs, tables, charts, or illustrations may carry weight with readers, as will the visual attractiveness of your text, whether in print or digital form. Obviously, correct spelling, grammar, and mechanics are important, too. (Lunsford and Ruszkiewicz 45)

This scant nod to good grammar, following the more prominent advice about the importance of a text's visual elements, is not much help to students who *don't know* what a grammatically correct sentence is.

Recognizing potential discrepancies between students' syntactic knowledge and the expectations of their teachers, compositionist Matthew Teorey notes, "College instructors must not assume that their students have mastered the fundamentals of grammar and usage" (20). Furthermore, he asserts that the mere possession of pricey handbooks does not bridge students' noticeable grammar gaps, left unfilled after twelve years of grammar-deficient schooling. In a classroom study, Teorey found that his students were able to identify sentences that "don't sound right," but they lacked the grammatical understanding to explain or correct errors of fragments, comma splices, and fused sentences, even when directed to handbooks for help. Attempts to rectify these problems often resulted in overcorrections and additional errors (19). Teorey's findings have significant implications for students in FYC and other writing contexts: proofreading for errors—the essential, final (and often overlooked) step of the writing process—is a futile effort for those who struggle with syntactic and other rules of standard written English. An important question to answer in FYC and beyond is this: which deviations from the "rules" matter most?

What the Research Tells Us

A 1981 study by Maxine Hairston concluded that some errors of standard written English *do* matter more than others in the eyes of the professional public, a significant audience for college graduates who aim to become and remain employed. Eighty-four respondents, representing a variety of professions, rated their perceptions of different

surface errors in a total of sixty-five sentences according to how "bothered" they were by particular mistakes ("Does not bother me"; "Bothers me a little"; and "Bothers me a lot"). Among the syntactic problems measured—including unnecessary or missing punctuation that might alter semantic intent—respondents considered the following errors to be "very serious": sentence fragments, fused sentences, commas between subjects and their verbs, and nonparallelism. "Fairly serious" ones included predication errors (for example, "The policy intimidates hiring") and dangling modifiers. The "medium to low" range of bothersome errors included failure to set off an appositive with commas, failure to set off introductory clauses with commas, and comma splices (796-97).

Hairston invited open-ended comments to the following question: "What is the most annoying feature of writing that comes across your desk?" Respondents had strong reactions to certain faulty sentence constructions, such as "incomplete sentences"; "sloppy grammar"; "plural verbs with singular nouns"; "misuse of commas"; "lack of parallelism"; and "run-on sentences." They were also critical of "literary acrobatics, no matter how grammatical, that tend to obscure meaning"; writers who cannot "explain themselves in succinct form"; and those who write "long convoluted sentences with needless verbiage" (798). To the professional public, it seems that Aristotle's admonition in *Rhetoric*—"Style to be good must be clear"—remains relevant more than two millennia after he shared it with his own students in ancient Greece ("From *Rhetoric*" 238; bk. 3, ch. 2).

Another survey of nonacademic professionals, published by Larry Beason in 2001, confirmed some of Hairston's original findings. Although more limited in scope (measuring the reaction of only fourteen respondents to just five error types), the results

indicated that the two errors related to syntax—unintentional fragments and fused

sentences—were bothersome to readers (41). Interviews with the subjects shed light on

the relationship between errors, related communication problems, and the writer's ethos:

"Errors create misunderstandings of the text's *meaning*, and they harm the *image* of the

writer (and possibly the organization to which the writer belongs)." Significantly,

interview results indicate that many students and teachers underestimate just how

damaging errors can be to credibility, potentially portraying the writer as hasty, careless,

uncaring, or uninformed (48-49).

In addition, the following comments of three respondents reveal that sentence

fragments and fused sentences in a text may suggest faulty reasoning to an audience:

"Well, again, I think it shows a lack of ability to understand what a complete thought

is . . . So I guess I would be very fearful if this were in an application"; "[The writer]

lacked some basic writing skills or education, and they didn't think very logically, and

they didn't proofread it"; and "Most of the time on a rewrite, when you go back and

formulate what you are trying to say, you can always put it in a better and more complete

thought structure. But this, this was not thought out well" (52-53). Such responses

illuminate a key point for instructors and students: a writer's "credibility and capabilities"

are often judged by errors made (60). Those of syntax are undoubtedly problematic.

In the mid-1980s, composition scholars Robert Connors and Andrea Lunsford

answered another important question regarding errors: which ones occur most frequently

in the writing of college students? From a random sample of 3,000 texts, written by

college freshmen and sophomores, Connors and Lunsford generated a list of the twenty

most frequently committed errors. Nine of these were related to syntactic glitches,

including punctuation problems that potentially interfere with intended meaning. In order of appearance on the list, they are as follows: no comma after an introductory element, no comma in a compound sentence, no comma in a nonrestrictive element, comma splice, sentence fragment, lack of comma in a series, unnecessary comma with a restrictive element, fused sentence, and dangling or misplaced modifier.

In 2008, Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford updated the 1988 Connors and Lunsford study in "'Mistakes Are a Fact of Life': A National Comparative Study," revealing three relevant trends: (1) increasingly stringent institutional review board (IRB) requirements had limited this nationwide study's sample size to 877 student texts versus the original study's 3,000 randomly selected papers from 20,000+ submissions (791); (2) written assignments had lengthened by an average of two-and-a-half times since the original study (from an average of 422 words to an average of 1,038 words per sample text) (792); and (3) argument-oriented papers had surpassed the personal narrative as the most common type of assignment, likely reflecting the increasing popularity of argument-based FYC courses (793).

Not surprisingly, the entries on the "Most Frequent Formal Errors" list had been shuffled with the passing of two decades. Some errors had departed altogether while others made a first-time appearance (although the syntactic errors and most punctuation errors mentioned above remained on the list). One new category of error—the tenth-place "faulty sentence structure"—is particularly apropos to this capstone's argument for incorporating sentence pedagogies in FYC curricula, and warrants a closer look:

> Of all the errors we noted, those we termed 'faulty sentence structure'
>
> intrigued us most. Some of these errors seem to arise when students cut and

paste passages from one sentence to another, or when they draft a sentence

and then delete a part of it to correct a mistake—but do not delete enough.

But we found many more 'faulty sentence structure' errors than these

reasons could account for, so much so that we speculate that a number of

them may result from students attempting to address complex topics in

complex ways. Perhaps the rise in the number of these errors signals the

cognitive difficulty associated with argument- and research-based writing,

as might be expected to accompany a shift from personal narrative to

argument and research. (798)

According to the coders who logged the results, faulty sentence structures were especially

noticeable because they *interfered with the meaning of texts*, as demonstrated in this

sample sentence from the study: "However, Marlow had put caps in the gun, proving that

Carmen became infuriated because she was rejected by Regan, as Marlow had also done,

and killed Rusty" (798).

Analyzing the connection between the increasing frequency of such faulty

sentence structures and the simultaneous upsurge in complex writing assignments,

Lunsford and Lunsford downplay potential claims (from critics like Stanley Fish) that

inadequate high school instruction and language erosion in the digital age are

contributing factors. In fact, they specifically mention a dearth of instant messaging lingo

("LOL" and "OMG"), "smilies" (the emojis of the time), and image-laden content in the

sample papers. But this syntactic trend could use further research. It certainly seems

reasonable that the complex nature of argumentative writing, especially in the context of

lengthier assignments, plays a role in the high rate of faulty sentence structures found in

the writing samples (798). However, it is also possible that an overall increase of what Crispin Thurlow and Kristine Mroczek term "digital discourse"—including fragmented and fused sentences, with little to no punctuation—had infiltrated the writing habits of digitally connected students by the time this study took place, making the task of writing in formal contexts even more difficult for college writers. Eight years after the Lunsford and Lunsford study was published, the patterns of digital discourse have likely become even more entrenched among students so accustomed to the distinct linguistic customs of the digital technologies on which they were raised. Regardless of the reason for the debut of this new category, the findings are relevant to FYC pedagogy: students write faulty sentences that often interfere with a text's meaning, and these faulty sentences can compromise a writer's credibility.

Cross-referencing data from all of these studies helps pinpoint which of the "most frequent errors" are most consequential to writers in nonacademic writing contexts. Syntax-based matches include faulty sentence structures, sentence fragments, fused sentences, comma splices, and several other punctuation errors that may interfere with meaning. Rei Noguchi explains that these kinds of errors are related to a writer's sentence confusion; they are based on a misunderstanding of *what a sentence is* and *how its constituent parts are logically connected*. Importantly, Noguchi asserts that students can more successfully identify and avoid errors of this kind with targeted (and minimal) grammar instruction applied in the context of their own writing (33), as chapter 3 further explains.

Admittedly, research on error has lagged behind the evolution of language in the digital age. And the researchers themselves acknowledge that patterns and perceptions of

error change over time. To help identify linguistic trends and expectations both within and outside of the academy, composition instructors should regularly undertake similar studies, which can inform FYC content and teaching strategies. As the Millennials who came of writing age using the discourse patterns of digital technologies increasingly *become* the decision-makers, linguistic changes are likely to be hastened in professional and social writing contexts. Perhaps sooner than later, fragments, fused sentences, and punctuation-deficient syntax will no longer be considered "bothersome" to those who determine the fates of college graduates. At that point, discerning writing teachers might reassess their expectations and grading rubrics. However, until then, FYC instructors should heed the closing words of Maxine Hairston in "Not All Errors Are Created Equal": "I think we cannot afford to let students leave our classrooms thinking that surface features of discourse do not matter. They do" (799).

Chapter 2: The Sentence Taught Through Time

Throughout most of rhetoric's long history, teachers of persuasive discourse have imparted the value of good sentences to their students. From the Sophists of ancient Greece to style-conscious writers in the twenty-first century, rhetors view sentence-level choices as integral to effective rhetoric—not just as a matter of "right" or "wrong" syntax, for persuasion demands much more than crafting grammatically correct sentences. In fact, it is the recognition that sentences have the potential to enhance not only the writer's appeal to ethos, but also the appeals to an audience's emotions and logic, that has led rhetoric teachers to naturally incorporate syntactic pedagogies in the classroom—for over two thousand years.

What follows is an overview of pedagogical approaches to teaching the sentence since antiquity. From the classical tradition of imitating model texts to twentieth-century practices of expanding and combining sentences, syntactic pedagogies have most often been employed to help students master the rhetorical canon of style. But as this brief history will explain, the use of such teaching methods waned in late nineteenth-century America as correctness and standard usage predominated in a young, growing democracy; waxed fleetingly during a rhetoric renaissance in the middle of the twentieth century; then waned again amid shifting disciplinary priorities in the field of composition studies.

Not Just a Matter of Correctness

In *Rhetoric*, Aristotle regards sentence-level choices in terms of style, first acknowledging that stylish language plays an important role in persuasion: "For it is not enough to know what we ought to say; we must also say it as we ought; much help is thus afforded towards producing the right impression of a speech" ("From *Rhetoric*" 236; bk. 3, ch. 1). Notably unenthusiastic about having to decorate thoughts with language, he directly faults audiences for this necessity: "We ought in fairness to fight our case with no help beyond the bare facts: nothing, therefore, should matter except the proof of those facts. Still . . . other things affect the result considerably, owing to the defects of our hearers" (237). Beyond speaking "good Greek," Aristotle's term for using correct grammar, these "other things"—all of which constitute the rhetorical canon of style— include language that is clear, appropriate for the occasion, and tastefully ornamented with metaphors (237-38; bk. 3, ch. 1-2). Moreover, they are all based on a rhetor's sentence-level choices.

Aristotle seems to minimize style's role in persuasion when he states, "The arts of language cannot help having a *small* but real importance" (237, emphasis added). Yet, as Kennedy notes, he devotes chapters 5 through 12 of *Rhetoric*'s book 3 to *synthesis*, or "putting together" words into sentences (220). In addition to advice on grammar in chapter 5, the other seven *synthesis*-related chapters in *Rhetoric* provide prescriptions for rhetorically effective sentences—those appealing to emotions and logic through the writer's use of metaphors and sentence structures, intentionally applied with given audiences and purposes in mind.

More than two millennia after Aristotle gave his lectures on rhetoric to students in ancient Greece, Stanley Fish, who has taught writing-related courses and published many articles and books on writing during a lengthy academic career, offers his own observations on the rhetorical power of the sentence in *How to Write a Sentence: And How to Read One*, with much more enthusiasm than Aristotle. Indeed, Fish's disdain for the poorly written sentence is eclipsed by his admiration of the well-crafted one. His treatise on syntax is filled with exemplary sentences and detailed explanations about what makes them work so well—parallelism, alliteration, allusion, repetition, coordination, subordination—proven tools of style dating from the classical era. To Fish, a staunch Anti-Foundationalist, language does not reflect or reveal truth; it actually "shapes" it, enabling the writer to "create a world, which is not the world, but the world as it appears within a dimension of assessment" (39). The goal of writing, then, is "to produce an effect, and the success of a sentence is measured by the degree to which the desired effect has been achieved" (37). With the ability to "draw readers in and make them want more" (5), a well-written sentence is thoroughly persuasive.

Aristotle and Stanley Fish agree: the sentence matters when it comes to persuading an audience. What is also clear to these two pedagogues—and to all who come between them on the timeline of rhetoric—is that recognizing a good sentence when you see one is easy, but teaching students how to write one is not.

The Sentence Imitated for Eloquent Discourse

In the classical tradition, as Andrea Lunsford notes, the practice of imitation—or *mimesis*—was an essential teaching tool. In fact, imitation exercises formed the "core of the early rhetoric curriculum," not as much for corrective purposes, but rather to expose

developing rhetors to a variety of sentence patterns that can later be used to match meaning with form ("Aristotelian Rhetoric" 9). Edward Corbett identifies three classical concepts of imitation most familiar to contemporary English pedagogues: (1) the "Platonic notion" that everything—including human behavior, creations, virtues, and institutions—is an imitation of ideal, universal truths; (2) the "Aristotelian notion" that imitation, a strong and natural human impulse, is an attempt to depict human actions and concrete objects; and (3) the "rhetorical notion" of imitation as "copying, aping, simulating, [and] emulating models" ("Theory and Practice" 243). Within the limited scope of this capstone, imitation will refer to Corbett's third definition—emulating the work of models, a doctrine that Ross Winterowd extols as "one of the great constants in rhetoric" (161).

Five varieties of this concept of imitation are evident in the work of Cicero and Quintilian, as explained by Dale Sullivan: (1) memorizing model texts; (2) translating such texts from one language to another; (3) paraphrasing selected passages; (4) mimicking the form of model texts using the student's own content; and (5) reading model texts—the most indirect method, but one that enables a writer to later, and subconsciously, recall stylistic forms and rhetorical strategies that have been internalized through the imitation of models (13). Importantly, imitation was not used to teach grammar in classical classrooms, for students were introduced to *mimesis* only after they had acquired grammatical proficiency.

According to Corbett, Isocrates was the first to expound the "value of imitating accomplished orators" ("Theory and Practice" 243). In *Against the Sophists*, Isocrates calls upon the fourth-century B.C.E. teacher to "in himself set such an example of oratory

that the students who have taken form under his instruction and are able to pattern after him will, from the outset, show in their speaking a degree of grace and charm which is not found in others" (74).

The first-century B.C.E. Roman orator Cicero advises the practice of emulating discriminately chosen models in *De Oratore*: "Let this then be my first counsel, that we show the student whom to copy, and to copy in such a way as to strive with all possible care to attain the most excellent qualities of his model" (320-21; bk. 2, ch. 23). In the contemporaneously written *Rhetorica ad Herennium (*ca. 84 B.C.E.)—described by Murphy as the "first complete Latin rhetoric" (24)—the unknown author[2] of this important work includes imitation in what Corbett refers to as a "triadic formula," used since antiquity to teach the five canons of classical rhetoric ("Theory and Practice" 244):

> All these faculties we can acquire by three means: Theory, Imitation, and
> Practice. By theory is meant a set of rules that provide a definite method
> and system of speaking. Imitation stimulates us to attain, in accordance
> with a studied method, the effectiveness of certain models in speaking.
> Practice is assiduous exercise and experience in speaking. (Cicero,
> *Rhetorica* 9; bk. 1, ch. 2)

In the first century C.E.'s *On the Sublime*, the unknown author referred to as Longinus advocates imitation as a means to "sublimity," a term denoting excellence in writing that, according to Bizzell and Herzberg, "has a powerful emotional impact on its audience" (345). Articulating this point with his own sublime writing, Longinus compares the literary benefits of imitation to the acquisition of mystic powers:

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[2] Some have credited this text to Cicero (including the publishers of the edition cited in this chapter), although this attribution has been disputed by contemporary scholars.

[T]he way of imitation and emulation of great writers of the past . . . is an aim to which we must hold fast. Many are possessed by a spirit not their own. It is like what we are told of the Pythia at Delphi: she is in contact with the tripod near the cleft in the ground which (so they say) exhales a divine vapour, and she is thereupon made pregnant by the supernatural power and forthwith prophesies as one inspired. Similarly, the genius of the ancients acts as a kind of oracular cavern, and effluences flow from it into the minds of their imitators. Even those previously not much inclined to prophesy become inspired and share the enthusiasm which comes from the greatness of others. (355; ch. 13)

The Roman rhetor Quintilian notably recognizes the generative role imitation plays in helping writers internalize new forms for later use, as explained in *Institutio Oratoria* (95 C.E.):

[T]hey will always have in their memory something which they may imitate, and will, even without being aware, reproduce that fashion of style which they have deeply impressed upon their minds. They will have at command, moreover, an abundance of words, phrases, figures, not sought for the occasion, but offering themselves spontaneously, as it were, from a store treasured within them." ("From *Institutes*" 377; bk. 2, ch. 7)

Like Aristotle, Quintilian views imitation as a human instinct—a "universal rule of life that we should wish to copy what we approve in others"—observing, "[T]he elementary study of every branch of learning is directed by reference to some definite standard that is placed before the learner" (*Institutio* 75; vol. 4, bk. 10, ch. 2).

The practice of imitation was perpetuated beyond the classical era by pedagogues who subscribed to the Greek and Roman traditions. In *On Christian Doctrine* (ca. 397 C.E), the Christian theologian and rhetor Augustine writes, "[M]en learn to be orators by reading and listening to the orations of orators, and, in as far as it is possible, by imitating them" (457; bk. 4). And during the stylish Renaissance, rhetoricians turned to classical models—from Isocrates to Cicero—for guidance on the practice of imitation, considered the "principle method of learning" of the time (Abbott 110). Desiderius Erasmus promotes imitation in *Copia: Foundations of Abundant Style*, a Latin textbook published in 1512, which was an essential handbook for students of rhetoric in sixteenth-century northern Europe (Bizzell and Herzberg 582). Adeptly demonstrating the art of paraphrasing and the boundless possibilities of language, Erasmus famously transforms the mundane sentence "Your letter pleased me mightily" into more than one hundred fifty variations (605-09; bk. 1, ch. 33).

Corbett points out that, in Renaissance classrooms, such experimentation with sentence structure served the purpose of helping students develop language flexibility and the rhetorical skills needed to write for different audiences and contexts (*Classical Rhetoric* 41). Toward that end, Erasmus also advises students to paraphrase well-known Greek authors, emulate excellent prose, and "thumb the great authors by day and night . . . [with] eyes open to observe every figure of speech that they use, store it in our memory once observed, imitate it once remembered, and by constant employment develop an expertise by which we may call upon it instantly" (599; bk. 1, ch. 9).

The Sentence Corrected for a Literate American Workforce

Classical traditions valued in Renaissance Europe made their way to an incipient higher education system in seventeenth-century colonial America. As Michael Halloran explains, among them was imitation, including the practices of "translation, imitation of models, reading aloud, [and] copying dictated material and printed texts" (153). The typical college student of the day was white, male, and a member of the elite class, preparing for a career in medicine, religion, or the law; both oratory and instruction in the classical languages of Latin and Greek were considered essential for imparting fluency in written English (153). But the oratorical tradition receded in eighteenth-century classrooms as an overriding concern for teaching "eloquent English" diminished the role of classical languages, and the "silent prose" of writing displaced oratory as a focal point of rhetorical study (154). It was also within this era of Romanticism that imitation garnered negative attention from critics who perceived the practice of copying models as antithetical to humanistic pursuits of genius and creativity—intellectual aims that were highly valued at the time (Sullivan 16).

Even as the eminence of classical languages and oratory subsided, and imitation's pedagogical dominance became increasingly questioned, late eighteenth-century and early nineteenth-century teaching methods continued to incorporate this ancient practice (Halloran 156-57). Scottish theologian Hugh Blair's 1783 *Lectures on Rhetoric and Belles Lettres,* the most widely used textbook through the early nineteenth century in the U.S., included and promoted the use of imitative exercises. Yet, as belletristic writing— "poetry, fiction, drama, essay"—became increasingly popular, textbooks like Blair's also played an early role in the major shift from traditional, invention-based rhetoric toward

stylish writing, along with more "personal" writing assignments in the classroom that further weakened imitation's standing (Halloran 164). Moreover, Sullivan argues that imitation became a victim of the "myth of progress," a tendency of advancing cultures to view past accomplishments as inferior to those of the present and future, which was a likely mindset within the intellectual milieu of the Romantic period and during the technologically progressive stretch that followed (Sullivan 15-16).

The industry-oriented nineteenth century pressed on, and the stature of classical rhetoric and its revered tradition of imitation continued to lose ground as a rising American middle class birthed a new kind of college student: "competitive strivers," many from humble socio-economic positions, who sought opportunities for upward mobility. As James Berlin explains, such opportunities required "professional expertise," creating demands on American higher education to both accommodate increasing numbers of students and also to provide writing instruction for a heterogeneous workforce in need of skills-based training (165). One response to these new priorities was the Morrill Federal Land Grant of 1862—a major federal effort that established state institutions to prepare diverse student populations for careers in science and profit-focused industries and facilitated the "new comprehensive university." Even some of the most elite American institutions conformed to the model of an elective curriculum, with pragmatic goals—including training future experts who could write grammatically correct sentences in order to support and succeed in a capitalist economy (185).

The "Freshman English" class emerged at Harvard University within this context. In the wake of scandalous failure by more than half of its entering students on newly administered writing exams in 1874, Harvard established a required freshman

composition course in the mid-1880s. Of course, it wasn't just Harvard's students who were woefully unprepared for the college writing needed for success in higher education and the workplace beyond the academy; thus, other institutions soon followed suit. Therefore, by the end of the century, the requisite first-year composition course had been implemented in colleges across the country. What would later be called the current-traditional model of writing instruction, of which Harvard was a "founding center," was now firmly entrenched in the composition classroom, emphasizing "the scientific values of precision, clarity, and conciseness" in order to "preserve the interests of corporate capitalism and the university-trained experts who serve it." In accordance with this larger aim, writing served to transfer existing knowledge from the mind onto the page, eliminating the need for invention. Style, ultimately, was reduced to a text's "mechanical correctness" (Berlin 188-89).

Between 1910 and 1960, the teaching of composition devolved into what Connors describes as a "scholarly backwater," during which ubiquitous freshman composition classes—"grueling apprenticeships" for graduate assistants and "frustrated" instructors— were steeped in this product-centered approach to writing instruction. As class sizes grew, demographics broadened, and institutional priorities were increasingly aligned with public goals, the sentence was studied in primarily taxonomic, not rhetorical, veins. Syntactic pedagogies, meant to foster error-free writing, consisted of workbook exercises and the classification of sentences by type (simple, compound, complex, and compound-complex) and function (declarative, imperative, interrogative, and exclamatory) (*Comp-Rhet* 13-15). Instructors of freshman composition classes often taught upwards of two hundred students at a time, necessitating simple assignments, such as narrative theme

papers that could be quickly graded with rubrics focused on accuracy, not rhetorical effectiveness (*Comp-Rhet* 142). By the 1920s, "rhetoric" had for the most part taken a leave of absence from writing classes taught by dispassionate instructors, with no background in rhetorical theory, who relied increasingly on handbooks and writing drills to impose standards of correctness. The current-traditional paradigm predominated in first-year composition classes through the middle of the twentieth century, during which writing was taught and assessed by what Mina Shaughnessy would characterize as "strangers" who read sentences on a page "with a lawyer's eyes, searching for flaws" (7).

The Sentence Transformed During a "Moment in the Sun"

This gloomy composition environment found relief with the introduction of three sentence-based pedagogies beginning in the 1960s, during what Connors describes as a brief but "extraordinary moment in the sun" ("Erasure" 97). The popularity of these "sentence rhetorics," as Connors calls them—which comprise the generative rhetoric of Francis Christensen, imitation exercises redux, and sentence-combining exercises—was fueled by twentieth-century developments in linguistics that coincided with and helped shape the mid-century revival and redesign of classical rhetoric ("Erasure" 97-98).

Francis Christensen's Generative Rhetoric

Francis Christensen, who was among many scholars in the field of composition drawn to rediscovered classical pedagogies during this time, launched the first of these up-and-coming pedagogies (Connors et al. 10-11). In a 1963 *College Composition and Communication* (*CCC*) article, "A Generative Rhetoric of the Sentence," Christensen observes that "we do not really teach our captive charges to write better—we merely expect them to" (15). Claiming that "the best grammar is the grammar that best displays

the English sentence" (157), Christensen sought a "rhetoric of the sentence" capable of

generating, not merely expressing, ideas. The result was a method for teaching what he

calls the "cumulative sentence": a base clause to which modifiers are added, at times

generously, to craft rhetorically rich, descriptive syntax (156). As Christensen explains,

the "generative" capacity of the cumulative sentence is not simply a matter of expanding

word counts in a text. Rather, the process of adding modifiers to a sentence's base clause

challenges the writer to "stay with the same idea, probing its bearing and implications,

exemplifying it or seeking an analogy or metaphor for it, or reducing it to details. Thus

the mere form of the sentence generates ideas" (156).

      Christensen illustrates the cumulative sentence with an excerpt from "Cross

Country Snow," a short story written by Ernest Hemingway, a writer more often lauded

for his command of "the simple sentence":

> George was coming down in the telemark position, kneeling, one leg
>
> forward and bent, the other trailing, his sticks hanging like some insect's
>
> thin legs, kicking up puffs of snow, and finally the whole kneeling, trailing
>
> figure coming around in a beautiful right curve, crouching, the legs shot
>
> forward and back, the body leaning out against the swing, the sticks
>
> accenting the curve like points of light, all in a wild cloud of snow. (qtd. in
>
> Christensen 157)

As Christensen points out, the "free modifiers" in this sentence—including prepositional

and participial phrases, and absolutes— add "structural layers" and "texture" to the base

clause, which consists of only four words: "George was coming down."

The resulting depth is not generally found in the "threadbare" sentences of typical first-year writers. Despite the misgivings of skeptics, Christensen contends that instructors *can* teach students how to use free modifiers (157)—begetting "sentence acrobats" who "dazzle by their syntactic maturity" (160). Importantly, he adds that generative rhetoric helps students develop a greater understanding of how style functions in their own writing and that of others. And rejecting critiques that his generative rhetoric is only useful in descriptive and narrative modes, Christensen explains, "This verbal virtuosity and syntactical ingenuity can be made to carry over into expository writing" (160). A particularly promising study not only measured statistically significant improvements in the assessed essays of students who used Christensen's method compared to a control group, but also reported that students who benefited from it "were enthusiastic about cumulative sentences" (Connors, "Erasure" 99).

Imitation Redux

In 1965, not long after Christensen's generative rhetoric debuted, the classical practice of imitation reemerged in composition studies when Edward Corbett repurposed rhetoric for the modern writing classroom with the publication of *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. The author's magnum opus, "to which every scholar working in composition since owes a debt," (Connors et al. 11), promotes two specific practices in a lengthy section on imitation's ability to improve students' syntactic skills. The first of these, "copying passages, word for word, from admired authors . . . may strike the student as being a rather brainless exercise, but it can teach the student a great deal about the niceties of style" (Corbett and Connors, *Classical* 465). The second practice, writing sentences based on patterns modeled by excellent writers using student-generated

content, was recommended as a next step, after developing writers had gained experience copying model passages directly (466).

As to patterning sentences based on models, Corbett lists examples of ten models and sample imitations of each, including this pair:

> MODEL SENTENCE: The gallows stood in a small yard, separate from the main grounds of the prison and overgrown with tall prickly weeds.
> - George Orwell, *Burmese Days*

> IMITATION: The dog shivered in the background, wet from nosing his way through the early-morning grasses and covered with damp cockle-spurs. (467-68)

Corbett substantiates imitation's worth with "testimonies" from relatively contemporary notables who used imitation exercises to strengthen their own rhetorical skills. Among them are Benjamin Franklin and Somerset Maugham, both of whom memorized passages from admired authors and then attempted to rewrite the same passages from memory; Winston Churchill, who imitated various sentence patterns in "drills" assigned by his English teacher, which he claimed made him a more proficient writer than fellow students who took Latin and Greek courses instead (450-52); and, in the fourth edition of the textbook—a collaboration between Corbett and Connors—the authors add to this list of imitators the self-taught Malcolm X, who learned to read and write by copying the entire dictionary by hand while in prison (413).

Connors contends that Corbett's treatise was a catalyst for imitation's "renaissance of popularity," noting that many other scholars did in fact follow Corbett's lead, publishing textbooks and journal articles that reiterated the value of this classical teaching practice and, in some cases, expanded imitation exercises in "hybrid" versions that incorporated sentence-combining. An inherent theory informing all of these

approaches is that imitation can familiarize students with "good models of prose style" to remedy their "stylistically barren" writing (Connors, "Erasure" 100). A "small but significant" contingent of supporters also praised imitation's role in nurturing creativity (102), just as Quintilian had done almost two millennia earlier. Composition scholar-teacher Ross Winterowd, who describes the "doctrine of imitation" as "one of the great constants in rhetoric" (161), asserts that because structures themselves carry meaning, imitation exercises actually "force meaning" as the writer chooses from an array of internalized linguistic possibilities. With forms at the ready, grammar becomes a "more flexible instrument for combining and hence enable[s] the student to take experience apart and put it together again in new ways," which is the theory behind imitation's generative capacity (164). Corbett adds that imitation "unlocks our powers and sets us free to be creative, original, and ultimately effective. *Imitate, so that you may be different*" ("Theory and Practice" 250).

Sentence-Combining

Connors defines the final and most acclaimed of the sentence rhetorics—sentence-combining—as "the process of joining two or more short, simple sentences to make one longer sentence, using embedding, deletion, subordination, and coordination," positing that some form of the method dates back to "the grammaticus of classical Rome" ("Erasure" 103). Shirley Rose concurs that these exercises likely have a classical lineage, tracing a more definitive recent history of this sentence rhetoric in her essay "100 Years of Sentence Combining."

As Rose explains, sentence-combining exercises had been put to use in American writing classrooms at least as early as the 1890s, even before theories existed to explain

the practice's efficacy. As with imitation, this sentence rhetoric had been collecting dust in the pedagogical closet until mid-nineteenth-century linguistic movements cast it into the limelight. The first of these, structural linguistics, classifies words by their function in a sentence, not just as discrete parts of speech. This concept provided a new approach to grammar instruction: a "structural grammar paradigm" that demonstrates how expanding parts and patterns of sentences can "create a happy blend of clear meaning and interesting variety of structure" (Pooley qtd. in Rose 491). According to Connors, though, it was Noam Chomsky's transformational-generative (TG) grammar that served as an even stronger impetus for the "sentence-combining juggernaut" that surfaced in the 1960s, gaining momentum through the 1970s ("Erasure" 103-05). TG grammar is founded on the concept that native-speaking linguistic competencies form the basis of countless syntactic combinations for retrieval in "performance" situations. Using what they inherently know about language, students can consciously strive for increased syntactic variety and fluency through the practice of sentence-combining. Most exciting about this "new" writing pedagogy was its clear success, demonstrated through empirical studies that measured significant increases in students' syntactic maturity and writing quality (106).

Rose notes that the exercises themselves had not changed much from the late 1800s through their reintroduction in the 1960s, as the following examples demonstrate. This 1906 exercise in "sentence mutation," from a textbook by Alfred E. Hitchcock, asks students to combine a group of "related assertions" into one simple or complex sentence: "A nobleman was to marry a princess. His servants were busy. They were preparing a wedding feast" (qtd. in Rose 484). One possible result among many follows: "The

servants were busy preparing a wedding feast for the nobleman and princess, who were set to marry." An exercise from the 1979 textbook *The Writer's Options,* by Daiker et al., similarly asks students to combine a group of sentences into one, instructing them to include at least one absolute phrase: "Jimmy walked slowly to the corner of the playground. His face was streaked with tears." The combined sentence would read, "Jimmy walked slowly to the corner of the playground, his face streaked with tears" (qtd. in Rose 486).

These examples demonstrate that the exercises had indeed remained constant over the course of almost one hundred years. But in the mid-twentieth century, sentence-combining had become pedagogically justified by linguistic theory. Furthermore, research proved the method successful in writing classrooms at all levels—from grade school through college. For teachers in search of a new grammar, Rose observes that sentence-combining provides a "bridge between grammar instruction and rhetorical instruction," empowering students to not only strive for grammatical correctness, but to also make rhetorically meaningful choices when writing sentences (491). By the late 1970s, sentence-combining had been deemed so successful among compositionists that it was touted as "a comprehensive writing program in and of itself, at least for one semester" by Kellogg Hunt, who had conceptualized the minimal terminable unit, or "T-unit," to measure a sentence's stylistic maturity (qtd. in Connors, "Erasure" 107).

The Sentence . . . Erased?

Connors argues convincingly that all three of the sentence rhetorics—generative rhetoric, imitation, and sentence combining—succeeded in improving the syntactic quality of students' writing, referencing an array of empirical and anecdotal evidence to

support this claim. Furthermore, he notes that these pedagogies were well received by many instructors and students alike. But in "an astonishing reversal of fortune," the entire trio had fallen out of favor by the mid-1980s. Connors pinpoints three "counterforces" that "erased the sentence" from both the classroom and further research in composition studies ("Erasure" 107), tying this opposition to a "hardening into disciplinary form of the field of composition studies as a subfield of English studies" (121).

The first of these counterforces is "anti-formalism," a rejection of teaching methods that emphasize form over content. As pedagogical attention shifted from the smaller parts of discourse—words, sentences, and paragraphs—to the whole, James Moffett, among other compositionists, argued that the sentence should be studied only "within its broader discursive context" (qtd. in Connors, "Erasure" 110). According to this view, surface-level concerns of sentence rhetorics detract from higher-order considerations of meaning, purpose, and organization.

Not surprisingly, expressivist heavyweights such as Peter Elbow and Donald Murray derided sentence rhetorics for stifling creativity and being arhetorical, rebuffing the notion that syntactic exercises can actually generate ideas (112-13). Murray went so far as to disavow two abiding principles of imitation—"students learn to write well by reading great literature" and "students learn to write better by reconstructing other people's sentences" (qtd. in Sullivan 15), including these two precepts among what he calls "Five Myths in the Teaching of Composition." But as James Murphy counters, imitation's pedagogical worth has been recognized for over two thousand years, so "[i]t seems inconceivable that any human enterprise of such longevity could be valueless" (74).

A second, and related, opposition to the sentence rhetorics came from critics who eschewed their mechanistic, "behaviorist" qualities, deemed systematic and "inherently demeaning to students" (Connors, "Erasure" 113). By the 1980s, mainstream compositionists had dismissed current-traditional rhetoric from process-centered classrooms, along with skills-based exercises evocative of this debunked pedagogy. These, of course, included the millennia-old imitation exercises that had flourished during the mid-twentieth-century reintroduction of rhetoric in composition studies.

In their extensive 1993 review of mid- to late twentieth-century literature on imitation, composition scholars Frank Farmer and Phillip Arrington cite a litany of colleagues who continued to value and professionally promote imitation's generative potential, even after interest in this revived sentence pedagogy had fizzled. Noting a puzzling lack of response to "compelling arguments" for imitation, Farmer and Arrington examine this disciplinary indifference in a lengthy section of their article that draws on the language theory of Mikhail Bakhtin. In Bahktinian terms, the scholarly "utterances" offered by proponents of imitation were met with silence within an "atmosphere of the already spoken" (qtd. in Farmer in Arrington 26): simply put, mainstream composition studies' indisputable "official line"—"that imitation is incompatible with process approaches to the teaching of writing"—had essentially closed the dialogue on this and the other two ill-fated sentence rhetorics (27).

Connors identifies the third and final blow to the sentence rhetorics as a deepening "anti-empiricism" slant in composition studies and the English departments with which most were affiliated. Prominent voices, such as Susan Wells and Patricia Bizzell, viewed the empirical evidence supporting syntactic pedagogies as overly

pragmatic, theoretically baseless, and subordinate to the priorities of critical and cultural studies movements that were intensifying in the late 1970s ("Erasure" 117). Accordingly, Richard Fulkerson's "Composition at the Turn of the Twentieth Century" identifies Critical/Cultural Studies (CCS) as major trends in composition studies leading up to the 1990s (659), eliciting academic articles in the hundreds, English department overhauls at a number of schools to accommodate theoretical shifts, and classrooms focused not on "improved writing" but rather on "liberation" from dominant discourses (660).

Consequently, by 1983, generative rhetoric, imitation, and sentence-combining were "stopped almost dead in their tracks" as compositionists hailed CCS and overwhelmingly accepted indictments of the sentence rhetorics, although no solid evidence justified their rejection (Connors, "Erasure" 20). Connors illustrates this disciplinary about-face with numerical data demonstrating the surge and then rapid decline of related publications—in books and journal articles—between 1960 and 1998. Scholarly attention to Christensen's generative rhetoric peaked between 1966 and 1975, with twenty-five publications; between 1991 and 1998, only one appeared. Imitation, while never receiving the star status of the other two sentence rhetorics, yielded nine and two publications respectively within corresponding time frames. Lastly, sentence-combining was the subject of a remarkable fifty-four publications between 1976 and 1985. However, between 1991 and 1998, this most celebrated sentence rhetoric of all experienced precipitously declining interest, spurring a mere two articles (108). Based on raw numbers, it seemed that the conversation about sentence rhetorics had all but ended.

The discipline forged ahead, embracing sundry pedagogical frameworks. Not surprisingly, many champions of the sentence rhetorics lost interest in fighting a losing

battle. And sadly, the sentence rhetorics lost their most vocal champion when Robert

Connors died in 2000, the same year his penetrating "The Erasure of the Sentence" was

published. Had Connors lived, though, he would have come to find that the sentence had

not been completely erased from composition studies. In fact, it was in the process of

being meaningfully revised for a new century and millennium.

Chapter 3: The Sentence Revised for a Stylish New Millennium

The "sentence" had indeed been largely dismissed in mainstream composition circles by the year 2000, but not all were so quick to erase it. As Andrea Lunsford and Karen Lunsford elucidated in their 2008 research on the frequency of errors made by college writers, the rate of faulty sentence structures was actually *increasing* in lengthier, argument- and research-oriented first-year essays. Meanwhile, a handful of compositionists intent on mitigating this trend were reconfiguring both grammar instruction and the sentence rhetorics for FYC, a full decade prior to the publication of "The Erasure of the Sentence."

The NCTE gave voice to this outnumbered but resolute faction of grammar-minded scholars when it established the Assembly for the Teaching of English Grammar (ATEG) in 1990. At the group's first conference, held independently of other NCTE annual events that year, participants representing all educational levels noted the need for a "free and open discussion" to explore alternatives to grammar instruction, which some instructors continued to teach in the formal, current-traditional fashion—rejecting the research that had soundly discredited such practices—while others rejected any and all forms of grammar instruction outright (Vavra). Higher education composition scholar-teachers led seventeen of the eighteen conference sessions, with titles reflecting an emerging conversation about the relevance of grammar instruction in college writing classrooms, including the following: "The Role of Grammar Teaching in Higher Education"; "Teaching Grammar Without the Grammar Books"; "Integrating Grammar

into the Process Reading and Writing Approach"; and "What Kind of Grammar Should We Teach in College?" (*Proceedings*). This call for dialogue seems to be an early attempt to challenge composition studies' "official line," as explained by Farmer and Arrington in their 1993 literature review on the topic of imitation—the same official line that Connors would implicitly link in 2000 to a categorical rejection of formalist and behaviorist pedagogies deemed incompatible with disciplinary priorities.

As the NCTE entertained conversations about grammar, two prominent views on the teaching of the subject at the college level emerged in 1991. The first is that of Rei Noguchi, whose "less is more" approach to grammar instruction targets *relevant* aspects of grammar that students, especially those with native linguistic awareness, can apply in the context of their own writing. Noguchi advocates the teaching of minimal grammatical categories—specifically, the terms subject, verb, modifier, and sentence/independent clause—that can help students recognize and decrease the most frequent and serious sentence-level errors in their writing and improve their stylistic awareness.

A second, more expansive view of grammar instruction is that of Martha Kolln, a founding member of the ATEG and the keynote speaker at the organization's inaugural conference. Kolln's "rhetorical grammar" approach calls for a much broader acquisition of categorical grammatical knowledge—a "toolkit of conscious grammar understanding"—to more fully prepare writers for a variety of rhetorical situations (*Rhetorical Grammar* xiii). Kolln, whose work is largely informed by structural linguistics, argues that a "deep and wide knowledge of grammar is highly useful," criticizing the "less is more" strategy because it limits the writer's options (Kolln and Hancock, "The Story of English" 29). These two perspectives differ in the amount of

explicit grammatical knowledge students should have, but they both recognize the rhetorical power of the sentence and view grammar as a critical component of style.

Most certainly, the rhetorical canon of style was garnering its own renewed attention in the midst of these turn-of-the-century grammar deliberations. In *The Rhetorical Tradition*, first published in 1990, Patricia Bizzell and Bruce Herzberg note style's eminence among twentieth-century "deconstructivist critics"—including Stanley Fish—who view it not merely as a decoration of thought, but as a rhetorical necessity. To the deconstructivists, sentence-level choices—particularly those employing metaphor— are generative in nature, representing "human thought processes" that help audiences more readily understand and engage with the writer's ideas (6). This twenty-first-century "stylistic turn in rhetoric and composition," as composition scholar Paul Butler refers to it, reflects a contemporary awareness of style's role in "persuasive discourse, reinvigorated by such dynamic forces as culture, identity, dialect, oral discourse, genre, multimodal forms, and global influence" (*Style in Rhetoric* 2). Importantly, this "turn" recognizes style's capacity in *all* pedagogical frameworks comprising composition studies, from critical and cultural studies to rhetoric and argumentation classrooms. Style, after all, is essential to persuasive and memorable writing (5).

Laura Micciche's 2004 *CCC* article, "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar," champions this notion. Extending the earlier argument of Lisa Delpit and others who view effective communication skills as complementary to the "larger goals of emancipatory teaching," Micciche explains that lessons in grammar and style are compatible with the critical and cultural studies at the core of her own FYC syllabus. To Micciche, rhetorical grammar helps students "learn how to generate persuasive, clear

thinking that reflects on and responds to language as work, as *produced* rather than evacuated of imperfections" (720). An understanding of rhetorical grammar—particularly its ability to shape meaning with language—can have "an empowering and sometimes transformative potential," enabling students to "critique normalizing discourses that conceal oppressive functions" (717). Observing an "absence of a sustained contemporary conversation about grammar instruction at the college level," Micciche proposes "a discourse about grammar that does not retreat from the realities we face in the classroom—a discourse that takes seriously the connection between writing and thinking, the interwoven relationship between what we say and how we say it" (718).

Grammar, Style, and the Sentence Rhetorics: Writing Process Friends, Not Foes

This heightened interest in the relationship between grammar and style, while hardly upending composition studies' focus on the writing process or mediating the "cacophony of difference that defines our field" (Butler, *Style in Rhetoric* 2), has inspired fresh pedagogical perspectives that regard grammatical choices and rhetorical goals as integrated, rather than mutually exclusive, pursuits. Notably, many of these perspectives embrace the sentence rhetorics as tools that can help students link the two writerly tasks of making syntactic decisions and persuading an audience, especially during the revision stage of the writing process.

In *Revising Prose,* Richard Lanham explains that revision—what he defines as "stylistic analysis" (v)—is the ideal time for writers to consider stylistic and rhetorical modifications to their texts. And while FYC instructors rightly direct students' attention to global issues of meaning and organization during revision, Lanham argues that revision, necessarily, is also a sentence-level endeavor: "Get the basic architecture of the

English sentence straight, I think, and everything else will follow" (viii). Lanham contends that instructors should help students learn how to effectively undertake the difficult task of revision because it is during this stage of the writing process that writing can be most improved (v).

In support of this goal, two common themes among scholars of syntax are evident. First, there is overwhelming agreement that students must know what a sentence actually *is* in order to effectively revise at the sentence level, enabling them to incorporate modifying clauses and phrases, combine sentences, and identify and avoid syntactic errors in writing—especially comma splices, fused sentences, and fragments (Shaughnessy; D'Eloia; Harris and Rowan; Corbett and Connors; Dawkins; Noguchi; Weaver; Fish). Secondly, a surprising number of composition scholars advocate the use of some or all three of the sentence rhetorics eulogized by Connors in "The Erasure of the Sentence," recognizing their potential to enhance the drafting and revision stages of the writing process.

The remainder of this chapter addresses two important questions related to these themes: (1) How can instructors help students acquire a functional understanding of the sentence in order to tame errors and put syntactic choices to rhetorical work?; and (2) What resources are available to First-Year Composition instructors who, like me, seek sentence-based pedagogies that can help students write more effectively to meet the many rhetorical challenges of academic, professional, and other writing contexts?

Defining a "Sentence"

Teaching students sentence sense is more complicated than it might seem, even to instructors. While Shaughnessy acknowledges that native writers "who have spoken

years of sentences cannot be said to be ignorant of sentences" (72), she also notes that many students do not have a functional understanding of what a basic sentence is—hence the fragments, fusions, and splices. In *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*, Stanley Fish observes that the definitions of a sentence found in typical handbooks are not sufficient. For example, to simply say "A sentence is a group of words having a complete subject and a complete predicate" is not useful to students who do not know what a "subject" and "predicate" are. Fish goes on to confidently define a sentence as "a structure of logical relationships" between words that includes a "person or thing performing an action," an "action being performed," and often a "recipient or object of the action" (20). But this definition is not foolproof, either, for it will not work with sentences that do not "express an action, and therefore lack a doer (e.g., *The temperature is low today* or *Mike's two books lay on the table . . .*)," often because such sentences contain linking verbs instead of action verbs (Noguchi 39-40).

Another common definition of a sentence—"any group of words [that] expresses a complete thought"—does not convincingly settle the matter, either:

> Consider the sequence *Jim didn't do his math homework. Because he hates it with a passion.* Certainly, *Jim didn't do his math homework* constitutes a complete thought and hence, by the given semantic definition, is a sentence. A student could, however, plausibly argue that *Because he hates it with a passion* also expresses a complete thought and hence is also a sentence. (Noguchi 39)

Constance Weaver gives a similar example of this type of faulty construction, common among college writers—one that gives the illusion of a complete thought: "The reason

being that we were late." In this case, the verbal "being" is not in fact a complete verb,

rendering this string of words neither a sentence nor a clause, but a fragment (191).

To help students identify structural problems in declarative sentences, Noguchi

suggests the use of "tag questions" and "yes-no questions" to test syntactic validity, as he

illustrates with the following examples:

> *Original Sentence:* Your next-door neighbor is going to sell his car for
> $400.
>
> *Tagged Sentence:* Your next-door neighbor is going to sell his car for $400,
> isn't he? (a grammatical transformation)
>
> *Yes-No Sentence:* Is your next-door neighbor going to sell his car for $400?
> (a grammatical transformation) (76)

If the original sentence is grammatical, the transformed sentences will be, too, as

demonstrated above. Conversely, if the original sentence is a fused sentence, fragment, or

comma splice, then one or both questions will yield a "nonsentence," recognizable to

most native writers based on their internalized linguistic knowledge (77). Although this

method requires no formal grammar instruction, it does depend on a student's ability to

form "tag" and "yes-no" questions.

Mina Shaughnessy contends that the ability to identify sentences is "probably the

most essential of all the grammatical skills," explaining that "one of the best ways to

develop [a] sense of the sentence" and "account for [its] constituent parts" does not

involve tagging it, yes-no-ing it, or parsing it, but rather expanding it from a base, using a

variety of modifiers (131). While Shaughnessy does not refer to Christensen's generative

rhetoric by name, she essentially proffers his concept of the cumulative sentence as a

means to solving a pedagogical dilemma: how to impart an understanding of sentence

components to her struggling basic writers, one of whom built the following thrilling sentence from the base "The problem will be solved" in a semester-end essay:

> The problem will be solved with the help of the Almighty, who, except for an occasional thunderstorm, reigns unmolested, high in the heavens above, when all of us, regardless of race or religious difference, can come together and study this severe problem inside out, all day and night if necessary, and are able to come to you on that great gettin' up morning and say, 'Mrs. Shaughnessy, we do know our verbs and adverbs.' (qtd. in Shaughnessy 132)

In this case, the student clearly grasps, as Fish would say, the "structure of logical relationships" between the words in this sentence. Shaughnessy herself concludes that "the perception of the sentence as a structure rather than a string of words is probably the most important insight a student can gain from the study of grammar, an insight that is likely to influence him not only as a proofreader but as a writer" (133).

Rhetorical Grammar and Sentence Rhetorics: Resources for the FYC Instructor

If the cumulative sentence truly has the ability to instill such insight, it certainly has a place in FYC, as do imitation and sentence-combining exercises. And it seems that a number of teacher-scholars agree. As my research reveals, all three of these sentence rhetorics are being put to good use by contemporary compositionists who unapologetically appreciate their value and actively engage in conversations to advance a conclusive reality: sentence-based pedagogies can help students learn to write more effective sentences (Butler; Fish; Graff et al.; Gunner; Killgallon; Kolln; Micciche; Lanham; Longknife; Morenberg and Sommers; Noden; Tufte; Weaver).

And once students grasp the logical relationships that comprise a sentence, FYC instructors have at the ready a number of excellent resources to help developing writers improve their understanding of grammar and style, and, ultimately, the quality of their writing and revision. While hardly exhaustive, the following annotated bibliography contains sources I have come across as a student and teacher at Kennesaw State University. Four of them were assigned textbooks in my graduate courses (Fish; Graff et al.; Kolln; Tufte), and the remainder were encountered during my research on sentence rhetorics. All of them offer ideas and exercises readily applicable or adaptable for use in FYC. I have included those that seem most promising and interesting to me as an instructor—resources that would certainly have benefitted me as an undergraduate student, and that I believe can benefit my own FYC students.

Sentence Rhetorics: An Annotated Bibliography

Butler, Paul. "Reconsidering the Teaching of Style." *The English Journal*, vol. 100, no. 4,

> Mar. 2011, pp. 77-82. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/23047785.
>
> Stemming from his view of style as a rhetorical tool that should be taught in
>
> twenty-first-century writing classrooms, Paul Butler, who teaches first-year
>
> through graduate-level courses in composition and rhetoric, explains theories that
>
> support sentence-combining, imitation, and Christensen's generative rhetoric.
>
> Demonstrating each with sample exercises, he also discusses concepts linked to
>
> improved cohesion and rhythm within and among a writer's sentences, including
>
> the "known-new" contract, patterns of emphasis in syntax, and the judicious use
>
> of the passive voice. This resource is helpful for newcomers to the sentence

rhetorics, who can learn about all three of them in this concise, informative
journal article.

Corbett, Edward P. J., and Robert J. Connors. *Style and Statement*. Oxford University
Press, 1999.

This book is a separate publication of the popular "Chapter IV" on style from the
authors' third and fourth editions of *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student.*
Corbett and Connors view matter and form as having an "integral relationship"
(2); thus, the sentence is the focal point of this textbook, which borrows heavily
from the classical tradition. A lengthy section on figures of speech catalogues
thirty-six tropes and schemes, including explanations and examples of each. The
second half of the book explains the rhetorical theories that support imitation;
provides model passages—written by thirty-four notable authors—for students to
copy verbatim; and contains several pages of model sentences for students to
imitate, using their own content within given sentence patterns.

Fish, Stanley. *How to Write a Sentence and How to Read One*. Harper, 2011.

Insisting that a mastery of form is necessary for generating persuasive content,
Stanley Fish analyzes some of his favorite sentences in this *New York Times*
bestseller, explaining that practice and conscious choices are essential for
improving a writer's syntax. According to Fish, understanding a sentence's
logical structure creates the foundation for a variety of syntactic options. He
demonstrates the concept of imitation with examples of his own imitations of
admired sentences. In addition, he implicitly applies the concepts of Christensen's
generative rhetoric and sentence-combining in chapters that discuss subordinated

and expanded sentence structures, explaining the rhetorical functions of these and

other syntactic styles. With engaging prose throughout, this quick read provides

excellent ideas that FYC instructors can apply in their classrooms as well as in

their own writing.

Graff, Gerald, Cathy Birkenstein, and Russel Durst. *They Say/I Say: The Moves That*

Matter in Academic Writing. 3rd ed., W. W. Norton & Co., 2015.

Ideal for first-year writers, this textbook incorporates principles of imitation with

a series of templates that help students learn the "basic moves" of academic

writing, such as signal phrases, transitions, and metacommentary. As the authors

note, these templates "make students more conscious of the rhetorical patterns

that are key to academic success but often pass under the classroom radar" (xxi).

In a chapter titled "Ain't So/Is Not," the authors explain how students can

experiment with various discursive styles—from academic to colloquial—to

effectively apply their writerly voices in academic essays.

Gunner, Jeanne. "A Return to the Rhetoric of the Sentence." *McGraw-Hill Higher*

Education, 2002. *MHHE*, www.mhhe.com/socscience/english/tc/pt/gunner.htm.

In this digitally published essay, compositionist Jeanne Gunner explains that

purposeful sentence-level choices can help writers establish authoritative voices

and present coherent ideas in their texts. To foster these qualities in the texts of

her basic writing students, Gunner assigns skills-oriented exercises based on the

work of Mina Shaughnessy, Francis Christensen, and other syntax-oriented

composition scholars. She encourages students to vary sentence structures and

consider the rhetorical effects of punctuation and modifier placement in their

syntax, demonstrating the results of this approach with writing samples from her students. Interestingly, she notes that grammatical correctness is a "common by-product" as writers gain confidence in their burgeoning writing skills.

Killgallon, Don. *Sentence Composing for College*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1998.

Replete with "sentence composing" exercises that imitate, expand, and combine sentences, this collection of skills-based activities is intended to help college writers develop more sophisticated prose. With a fourth sentence rhetoric—sentence unscrambling—students rebuild intermingled sentence components to gain insight into how professional writers put ideas together. Throughout this "worktext," the author focuses on three specific professional sentence structures—absolute, appositive, and participial phrases—explaining how their positions within sentences can be varied for rhetorical effect.

Killgallon, Don, and Jenny Killgallon. *Grammar for College Writing: A Sentence-Composing Approach—A Student Worktext*. Boynton/Cook, 2010.

This "sentence-composing toolbox" invites students to apply the four sentence-composing exercises included in Don Killgallon's *Sentence Composing for College*—imitation, sentence-combining, sentence expansion, and sentence unscrambling—while introducing a more extensive collection of explicit grammatical terms. The authors base their syntactic exercises on model texts that will likely appeal to student writers, using numerous excerpts from the work of notable writers such as Stephen King, Toni Morrison, Barack Obama, and J. K. Rowling to inspire students to craft more persuasive prose.

Kolln, Martha, and Loretta Gray. *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices,*

Rhetorical Effects. 7th ed., Pearson, 2013.

Grounded in structural linguistics, this textbook is a comprehensive introduction

to the grammatical tools and choices writers can consciously apply for specific

rhetorical purposes during the composing, revising, and editing stages of the

writing process. The authors include hundreds of terms, explained and

demonstrated with examples from fiction and nonfiction prose. In addition,

exercises—some of which incorporate sentence-combining and sentence

expansion practice—and group discussion activities provide students with the

opportunity to put ideas into practice. While this source includes an extensive

amount of material for a one- or even two-semester composition class, it has

many potential FYC applications. In addition, Kolln's textbook is ideal for

advanced undergraduates, graduate students, and instructors whose academic and

professional needs call for an expansive foundation of grammatical terms and

concepts.

Longknife, Ann, and K.D. Sullivan. *The Art of Styling Sentences*. 5th ed., Barron's, 2012.

First published in 1972, at the height of the sentence rhetoric era, this textbook is

founded on the classical precept of imitation. Longknife and Sullivan showcase

twenty sentence patterns—from compound sentences with varied punctuation to

deliberate sentence fragments—explaining the distinct nature of each pattern. In

addition, the authors point out when and why writers might choose certain

patterns over others. Professional examples from fiction and nonfiction

demonstrate concepts that students can practice with corresponding sentence

composing exercises, using their own content. In separate chapters, the authors also define the basic sentence, explain how different sentence patterns can be combined for rhetorical purposes, and discuss some of the most common figures of speech.

Micciche, Laura. "Making a Case for Rhetorical Grammar." *College Composition and Communication*, vol. 55, no. 4, June 2004, pp. 716-37. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/4140668.

Based on the author's position that grammar instruction is complementary to, not at odds with, critical and cultural pedagogies, Laura Micciche makes a convincing argument for rhetorical grammar instruction in FYC, sharing her own successful teaching strategies aligned with this perspective. With select literary examples, including George Orwell's "Politics and the English Language" and bell hooks's "Language," Micciche helps her students see how "grammar use can sometimes function as a form of resistance" (723). Assigned textbooks include Martha Kolln's *Rhetorical Grammar* as well as Sharon Crowley and Debra Hawhee's *Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*, from which Micciche teaches classical "figures of thought" and applies the classical practice of "commonplace books," with which students "imitate and record passages of their own choosing" throughout the semester (724).

Morenberg, Max, and Jeff Sommers. *The Writer's Options: Lessons in Style and Arrangement*. 8th ed., Pearson, 2007.

Initially published in 1978 for college-level writers, the eighth edition of this textbook continues the sentence-combining tradition from which it emerged,

adhering to the decades-old claim that first-year students who practice sentence-combining demonstrate greater improvement in the quality of their writing than those who do not. Concepts introduced include relative clauses, participles, appositives, absolutes, prepositional and infinitive phrases, coordination and subordination, and the nominal structures of infinitives and gerunds. The authors explain the rhetorical reasons for using various modifiers and sentence patterns, and they incorporate related sentence-combining exercises that enable students to apply specific concepts. Lessons on cohesion, paragraphs, and essay drafts are included in the book's final chapter.

Noden, Harry. *Image Grammar: Teaching Grammar as Part of the Writing Process*. 2nd ed., Heinemann, 2011.

Harry Noden explains how instructors can teach students to add descriptive details to their texts during revision with concrete nouns and "brushstrokes": participles, absolutes, appositives, adjectives shifted out of order, and action verbs. These comprise a "zoom lens" to fill descriptive voids in both fiction and nonfiction writing. The author recommends that instructors use visual art and other image-based prompts, outlining lessons based on Christensen's generative rhetoric, imitation, punctuation, and the use of parallel structures. In addition, he includes "revision checklists" that can help students revise elements of both style and usage. Originally designed with his own middle school students in mind, Noden's writer-as-artist lessons can engage students at all levels, including FYC.

Tufte, Virginia. *Artful Sentences: Syntax as Style*. Graphics Press, 2006.

> Virginia Tufte catalogues more than one thousand model sentences, chosen from both fiction and nonfiction genres, in this nearly three-hundred-page text. Short sentences, noun and verb phrases, Christensen-style free modifiers, and parallelism are among the many syntactic options the author highlights in individual chapters, all of which include commentary on how professional writers apply these concepts for specific rhetorical purposes. Tufte helpfully explains a variety of grammatical terms, making them accessible to readers of all backgrounds with her own engaging prose.

Weaver, Constance. *Teaching Grammar in Context*. Boynton/Cook Publishers, Inc., 1996.

> Much of this resource is devoted to providing the author's rationale for her minimalist, grammar-in-the-context-of-student-writing pedagogical stance. Weaver explains how mini-lessons can address circumstantial concerns that might arise with individual students, or among groups of students, and she outlines essential concepts that can help students effectively revise and edit their own texts. These include, at a minimum, the following: sentence, subject, verb, and independent and dependent clauses. With more advanced undergraduate and graduate writers, Weaver suggests introducing a broader range of terms, such as appositives, absolutes, and participles. A lengthy appendix provides sample lessons and exercises that can be directly applied or adapted for use in FYC, including several that call for combining and expanding sentences.

Conclusion

In June of 2005, just one month after Stanley Fish condemned the writing skills of high school and college graduates in *The New York Times*, Richard Fulkerson analyzed the state of composition studies in "Composition at the Turn of the Twenty-First Century," observing, "We differ about what our courses are supposed to achieve, about how effective writing is best produced, about what an effective classroom looks like, and about what it means to make knowledge" (680-81). He describes a field more "complex" than ever, as it accommodates the intensifying influences of "cultural studies, postmodernism in comp, genre theory, and discourse community theory (not to mention assessment placement, service, teacher preparation, etc.)" (679).

A review of recent NCTE journals *CCC* and *College English* reveals increasing disciplinary complexity since Fulkerson's piece was published. The November 2016 issue of *College English*, a special edition entitled "Toward Writing Assessment as Social Justice," explores "disparities caused by and reflected in writing assessment practices" and "novel ways to make writing assessment more democratic" (Poe and Inoue 124). In 2016, issues of these journals included numerous titles pertaining to translingualism, composing in digital spaces, and the unacceptable status and working conditions of contingent faculty. Within the past ten years, amid these important conversations, articles concerning writing instruction vis-à-vis grammar and/or style have been few and far between.

In the meantime, many college students continue to write faulty sentences, as they always have. And many readers beyond the Ivory Tower continue to assess writing skills based on metrics having nothing to do with social justice or an appreciation of linguistic diversity. More significantly, students and graduates who cannot communicate effectively in writing will have limited opportunities to contribute meaningfully to the important conversations taking place in the world around them.

FYC is often a final opportunity for students to learn how to write rhetorically sound sentences—those both correct and persuasive. And my research indicates that the sentence rhetorics, already proven successful within the field of composition studies itself, can help first-year writers accomplish this aim. Here are some suggestions for how contemporary compositionists might "rewrite" the sentence in FYC:

- Follow the advice of Maxine Hairston: inform students that surface features of discourse "matter."

- Encourage instructors to broaden their own knowledge about grammar and its use as a rhetorical tool, particularly those of us who came of writing age during the "anti-grammar" movement in composition studies that created a generational grammar gap. Martha Kolln and Loretta Gray's *Rhetorical Grammar: Grammatical Choices, Rhetorical Effects* is a comprehensive resource for instructors in need of strengthening their own understanding of grammar and the rhetorical potential of sentence-level decisions.

- Incorporate sentence imitation, sentence expansion, and sentence-combining activities into FYC classrooms. Many excellent pedagogical

resources provide a starting point for instructors seeking effective syntactic pedagogies, including the time-saving and engaging mini-lessons in Constance Weaver's *Teaching Grammar in Context*.

- Integrate sentence rhetorics into FYC textbooks, using the classical "triadic formula" of theory, imitation, and practice as a model. This has been successfully accomplished by Corbett and Connors (*Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*) and Crowley and Hawhee (*Ancient Rhetorics for Contemporary Students*). As Micciche notes, such methods complement many FYC theoretical frameworks, including argumentation, genre, and critical and cultural studies. Ready-made textbook applications would render sentence rhetorics more accessible for the overloaded FYC instructor.

- Promote broader disciplinary conversations about how sentence-based pedagogies, along with an understanding of rhetorical grammar, can help students appreciate discursive variety, make meaning with language, and apply syntactic strategies to improve their writing.

Kenneth Burke suggests that such conversations take place in a metaphorical parlor, where participants come and go through time, creating and sharing knowledge along the way (110-11). While the composition studies parlor is more crowded than ever, there is a need to reopen the conversation about how FYC can help students write more effective sentences. With strengthened voices, students will be equipped to participate in dialogues of their choosing, be they academic, professional, social, or socially just in nature. The scholar-teachers who are whispering about sentence-rhetorics in the foyer

should be welcomed back into the main room. Let's rewrite the sentence in FYC—for the

sake of our students.

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